OFFICER SAFETY: THE CORE ISSUES

by Richard Kipp, Chief, Lehigh County Department of Adult Probation and Parole, Allentown, Pennsylvania

Officer safety is not a community corrections philosophy or mission; it has nothing to do with whether you perceive your role as a social worker or police officer. Officer safety is a commitment to a specific and practical plan to ensure the safety, survival, and welfare of officers. Officer safety is a challenge to the principles and assumptions we have held about community corrections for decades.

Like many other social institutions, community corrections agencies are attempting to respond to rapid social change and its related problems. Many departments and officers feel themselves to be slowly drowning in a rising tide of serious crime. Illegal drugs, gang violence, and high-risk offenders are all threats to officer safety.

Officer Safety-A State of Mind

Officer safety is, foremost, a state of mind. For many, it is simply a cognitive exercise, but for others, it is an emotional confrontation with risks and uncertainties. During training on officer safety, we have observed that many listen, learn, and adjust their mental attitudes. However, many others find the training inappropriate, feeling that it creates paranoia or is in conflict with what they believe a community corrections philosophy, mission, or practice should be. Unfortunately, the value of training is acknowledged by some only after they have been injured.

Surveys of county, state, and federal probation and parole jurisdictions have determined that the victimization of officers, whether through intimidation or physical assault, is a significant problem. Officer victimization is a realistic consequence of officers' performance of their duty. Regardless of whether a department makes arrests, whether it is office- or field-based, and whether it counsels or brokers services, it should require safety training for all new and tenured officers. We must give officers the skills to be mentally prepared, to recognize the dynamics of confrontations, to control situations, and to disengage safely.

Risk Is Part of the Job

To deal effectively with offenders, officers must supervise them through close and continuous contact. Although officers must be prepared, they cannot adopt too defensive a posture of caution and still perform their mission. Staff representing all levels and functions must gain a realistic anticipation of the threats that may arise and develop options for safely avoiding or resolving those threats.

Research has not identified a recurring, predictable pattern of physical behavior that is a reliable indication of an assailant personality or of what might provoke an attack We do know that offenders can decide when, where, and whom to attack, on grounds that may be purely selfish or totally irrational. The fact is simply that officers supervise high-risk offenders-as well as those whose risk is unknown.

Recognizing the Need for Training

Throughout the country, line staff-but not all administrators-are identifying officer safety as the most important training need in community corrections. Line staff feel this need because they have more directly faced the increased risk to safety resulting from current characteristics of the environment and of the offenders. Management's problem-solving skills, on the other hand, have tended to be in a reactive mode. Unfortunately, it often takes a violent incident to trigger an administrator's attention to the importance of officer safety.

Why must we wait for an officer's death before training becomes a priority issue? Why must we wait for an exposure to tuberculosis, hepatitis, or tetanus before we test or vaccinate officers? The cost of defensive tactics training, metal detectors, soft body armor, radios, and shields in vehicles should no longer be considered a budgetary extravagance, but a necessity. The fact that even one officer has been killed, raped, or seriously injured is enough to validate training as a necessity and pursue it with tenacity.

The picture of the future is also clear. No one is predicting a decline in drug and alcohol use, gang violence, or officer victimization. Nor do we anticipate significant increases in community corrections funding or resource allocation. However, by recognizing these facts, we can gain extraordinary leverage in shaping the future to improve officers' safety. During times of high turbulence, we need to be proactive in our training. We need to be anticipatory, not reactionary.

Even if anticipation, problem identification, and common sense may elude us, we know that the courts will judge us. Allegations of excessive use of force, negligent entrustment of equipment, or negligent failure to train are likely to result in our paying financial reparation for our failure to address officer safety.

Elements of a Good Safety Training Program

Every department must develop a plan to implement officer safety training, which should address:

- Safety awareness,
- Street survival,
- Use of force,
- First aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation,
- Legal liabilities,
- Guidelines for report writing,
- Crisis de-escalation skills,

- Universal precautions (exposure control of infectious materials),
- Vehicle use,
- Office security,
- Defensive tactics,
- Officer victimization, and
- Use of equipment such as metal detectors, radios, soft body armor, vehicles, impact instruments, chemical agents, and firearms.

Training must be relevant, recent, and realistic, and it must focus on community corrections. Although material and trainers from other disciplines (e.g., police, sheriff, or corrections) may be used, what they provide must be germane to community corrections departments' policies and procedures.

Contemporary tactics to increase officer safety result from both positive and negative experiences in the field. Many training programs have not benefited from these experiences, however. For example, some jurisdictions are still training officers to search, then handcuff, or to search using an unprotected hand. However, it has been proven that if officers handcuff prior to searching, they will have a greater probability of protecting themselves, detecting potential weapons, and controlling an offender. We need to teach recent tactics.

Much training is too static, sterile, and inapplicable to real situations. Consequently, officers fail to understand the dynamics of a confrontation. Training must be dynamic, cause stress, and simulate real-life encounters. Training must make safe behaviors natural and reflexive. Under stress or in a crisis, officers will instinctively revert to the way we have trained them. As the brain compares present against future, it analyzes what has happened in the past. The brain will unconsciously scan past events in selecting present options. Because the brain reacts to cues, we must require that simulation training pm-programs critical cues and allows officers to practice responses. In addition, training must be repeated; competency development requires extensive practice.

The Importance of Verbal De-Escalation

Training must concentrate on the knowledge and skills that officers will need in most confrontations. Unfortunately, because firearms have come to be seen by some as the panacea for officer safety, training in persuasion and verbal de-escalation techniques has been subordinated. However, these verbal skills are used most frequently to prevent or resolve threats. Many departments choosing to arm officers have not provided training in other crucial areas, such as verbal de-escalation, unarmed self-defense, or the use of chemical agents.

Most subjects encountered by officers are cooperative. Some are resisters. A small number are assailants. The number of subjects using force that justifies an officer in responding with lethal force is insubstantial. Despite this, departments continue to put firearms at the core of safety training and fail to provide adequate training in force that is less than lethal.

We should not, of course, dismiss the place of firearms or the potential for officers-despite their best efforts-to be placed in life-threatening situations. However,

firearms are only one tool in officers' repertory of skills and equipment. This repertory must also include the officers' ability to correctly apply:

- Verbal control,
- Techniques of holding and stunning,
- Direct mechanical control without weapons,
- Control modes with weapons (i.e., impact instruments), chemical agents, and firearm, and
- The ability to disengage.

Without the option of different tools, officers will compensate by applying inappropriate force. Ineffective or excessive force places officers and departments at risk of injury and litigation.

The Use-of-Force Model

A use-of-force model is the foundation for all officer safety training. The department should select a model based on its ability to describe the reasons, considerations, and limitations of all levels of force. Such a model can generalize, categorize, and relate circumstances existing at the time force is used, based on the threat and resistance level of a subject's behavior. A subject's behavior is a more accurate predictor of risk than appearance, attitude, or other characteristics, which am values-based and sometimes prejudicial.

A use-of-force model must clearly define the types of force available to an officer. The strength of such a model is in its ability to permit an officer to make a split-second decision, assessing a subject's immediate threat and determining the specific amount of force necessary to control the subject. Models that are ambiguous foster hesitation and uncertainty, which can lead to ineffective or excessive force.

Factors in Training and Certification

Departments should develop an annual training and certification program for officer safety. The program must include a written training description, syllabus, list of instructors, training dates, number of training hours, practical and written tests, and provisions for retesting. Departments should also apply performance measures to trainees. Unless we can document competence, we may be entrusting equipment inappropriately or assigning officers to tasks beyond their ability.

Budgetary constraints are not defensible in allegations of negligent failure to train. At the same time, however, training does not have to be expensive. A skilled bank of in-house trainers is cost-effective and can allow for flexibility in scheduling, remedial training, and assistance in policy and procedure development. In-house trainers can also be useful in reviews of use-of-force incidents.

In addition, training does not have to be a full-time assignment. Many trainers maintain traditional or specialized caseloads, with training an ancillary or small part of their jobs.

Trainer credentials. Trainers need to have credentials. An officer who has a black belt in karate is not necessarily qualified to be an instructor. Certification through a nationally recognized program (e.g., the American Red Cross, the National Rifle Association, or Protective Safety System) offers the best assurance that an instructor has the necessary knowledge, skills, and ability to instruct.

Legal review. When an agency is considering a training program, it is also important to determine the extent to which the program has been involved in court proceedings. For example, a program based on a use-of-force model that has survived the scrutiny of the court may make a significant contribution in preventing or defending against litigation.

Equipment selection. Selecting equipment is a process, not simply the result of a recommendation from a local law enforcement agency or vendor. If a piece of equip ment is used incorrectly or is used correctly but is blamed for an injury, the department must be prepared to explain why that particular equipment (including type, brand, and model) was selected. Technical reports, such as those prepared by the National Institute of Justice, provide useful comparative information and are available for nearly all types of equipment. It is also important to field-test equipment to avoid mistakes such as purchasing a firearm whose circumference is too large for officers to grip.

Community corrections is a hazardous occupation and demands vigilance. We must realize that the nature of community corrections is putting officers into high-conflict environments to work with high-conflict people. Whether an officer sees him- or herself as a social worker or a police officer is irrelevant-what is important is the officer's state of mind. Officer safety forces us to face our vulnerability and mortality. It requires a substantial commitment. It forces us to take better care of ourselves.

For additional information, contact Richard Kipp, Chief, Lehigh County Department of Adult Probation and Parole, Allentown, Pennsylvania; telephone (610) 820-3410. ■